

# Life after EPA

## Libby officials show concern about future responsibilities

By Brent Shrum

Kootenai Valley Record  
As the Environmental Protection Agency finalizes its cleanup plans for the former vermiculite processing site that is now Libby's Riverfront Park, city officials are turning their attention to local responsibilities after the agency leaves town.

City council members expressed their concerns to EPA regional administrator Jim Martin during a special meeting last Wednesday. Martin, who was appointed to the Denver-based position last spring, said he plans to be in Libby "relatively often."

"I'm interested in hearing from elected leaders and the Chamber of Commerce and others about how we're doing and what you see on the horizon and how we can help," he told the council.

Councilman Bill Bischoff said one of his biggest concerns is the

cost of maintaining the site after the EPA is gone from Libby.

"I think everyone's concerned that the fund that's been set up is insufficient," Bischoff said.

Martin said the agency will need to "take a hard look at it" over the next few years, adding that the EPA will also be working with state officials to coordinate their share of the long-term oversight of the Libby cleanup.

Councilwoman Barb Desch also had questions about local responsibilities.

"What's it going to be like once you guys are gone and you have everything completed the way you think it needs to be completed?" she asked.

Councilwoman Peggy Williams added a touch of skepticism about Martin's visit and said she's interested to see if it has any lasting impact.

## EPA

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"I just feel that we've had some drive-by visits by higher authorities, and I just can't see that in the long run it's ever produced anything," she said.

Martin said the EPA has been "a significant part of the community" for the past few years and will continue to be for a few more years. The agency owes it to the community to be here to listen to local concerns, he said.

Councilman D.C. Orr said he's also worried about

whether funding will hold out and if the EPA has done its job planning the cleanup.

"I want to do the homework up front if at all possible," he said. "Communications are key, and we have several issues where we just can't seem to get the information we need to make the decisions we need to make."

Orr noted "risk communication problems" and said the EPA should finalize toxicology studies and risk assessments before

moving ahead with records of decision.

Those issues are complicated by the still developing knowledge of Libby amphibole asbestos, Martin said. Coming up with answers about risks is "an enormously complex and time consuming and expensive process," he said.

"There is nothing I can do to move it faster other than make sure that it stays on track," Martin said.

In the absence of final answers, "it seems to me that the logical thing to do

is do the work we can, and make sure at least we're reducing risk," Martin said, adding that Libby is much cleaner now than it was a decade ago.

"The bottom line is the situation in Libby is vastly better than it was in 1999 when we first showed up," he said.

Councilwoman Robin Benson expressed concerns about repairing Libby's tarnished image. She asked how the EPA can help spread the word that Libby is no longer "the

town left to die" but is again a healthy, flourishing community.

"Some of us are still trying to live here, work here, create jobs, that kind of thing," she said.

One of the agency's responsibilities is to get the word out "that our work here is done, and that it is safe to live and work here," Martin said.

"I think that will be part of our shared responsibility," he said.

Councilwoman Vicki Lawrence said she wanted to thank the EPA for helping keep Libby from becoming "a ghost town."

"If there was no one coming into town to help us with this process, I think it would be a ghost town," she said.